FIAE Chapter 1

This chapter was helpful because it answered a question that I had regarding differentiated instruction. While reading Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design, I began to wonder that if too much differentiation can actually make students too dependent on having others make amendments for them, therefore making their transition into the “real world” more difficult. Wormeli makes a strong argument against this possibility when he claims that by differentiating, teachers are really providing their students with the “appropriate challenge that enables [them] to thrive” (4). If students are faced with a teacher who does not provide differentiation, the greater the chances that they do not follow through and succeed because they will be more likely to give up when the teaching style does not meet their needs. I also agree that differentiation leads to student awareness in terms of their individual learning styles and that it encourages them to think about how they learn best. Once they have an understanding of this, they will be better equipped to make sure that they are getting the right kind of instruction later on in their schooling, thus making them independent enough to know what they need. Because of this, I will not try to hide differentiation from my students. In fact, I will encourage them to consider how everyone learns differently and I will be sure to emphasize how a variety of different learning styles is actually very beneficial in creating a dynamic classroom environment. That way, no one will feel like they need to be ashamed for “learning differently” and they will instead embrace it.

FIAE Chapter 2

I found that many of the concepts in this chapter connect to those outlined in chapter five of Understanding by Design, making them seem slightly repetitive but also reinforced. One section that I found to be quite helpful, however, was the list of resources for helping determine what is important to teach in a particular unit. I’ve always wondered how teachers decide what they are going to focus on and what to skip over (because let’s face it, it’s impossible to cover absolutely everything), despite having standards to guide them. One of my biggest fears about teaching deals with determining the content and resources that are necessary (and most relevant) to helping students master the standards, so I will definitely refer back to this list! I also don’t want to get stuck “teaching to the textbook”, which I feel could be an easy trap to fall into, especially for a new teacher. One suggestion the chapter made that I didn’t really like, however, was the use of district scripts. I don’t know if this is something I will ever encounter, but the idea of having a bunch of students from different classrooms and different schools being told to focus on the same thing on a particular day just doesn’t seem realistic. I see it as more of a stressor for the teacher, who may have to adjust their curriculum in order to follow the generic guidelines. All students and classes are at different paces and I think that a teacher should stick with the pace that works best for her students.

FIAE Chapter 3

One question that arose in my mind very early into this chapter was: if we as teachers are supposed to be very clear about what information the students are going to be “tested” on or assessed on, how do we show students that the content they are learning is important for reasons beyond the test or assessment? On page 21, Wormeli says, “it may be radical, but go ahead and give students the end-of-unit test on the first day of teaching the unit… when you teach the unit and mention an answer to one of the test questions, students will perk up and listen, elevating the information to importance.” While I understand Wormeli’s point in that by introducing the test material at the beginning of a unit, students will immediately know what to expect and what to look for, thus giving them more incentive to pay attention as the unit moves forward. It’s kind of like showing the students the backward design process as you are giving them an outline of the desired goals, and it also makes it more likely that they will succeed on the test. However, I do not feel that this strategy comes without drawbacks. The biggest concern I have about introducing a unit with test questions is that it could make students feel as though the only reason they are learning the content is to that they can use it on the test, not because it has significance outside of the classroom. I also worry that the students may be more likely to “zone out” during parts of the unit that do not pertain directly to the questions on the test because they will not find the information important and/or worthwhile simply because there aren’t any test questions about it. For these reasons, I will be very careful if I ever chose to use this method in my classroom and make sure that I show students how what they are learning is important can be applied in the “real world.”

FIAE Chapter 4

Although it wasn’t stated, I’m assuming that it is best for teachers to use a combination of the three types of assessment (portfolios, rubrics, and student self-assessments) discussed in this chapter. I especially like the idea of portfolios, but I’ve never really liked rubrics. However, because they are so different from each other, they are probably each useful in their own way. In my future classroom, for example, I might use portfolios to gauge the progress of my students’ writing abilities while using rubrics to grade the individual pieces that go into the portfolio. I would definitely place more weight on the grade of the entire portfolio, however, versus the grade of each individual piece. I like to think of rubrics more as guides for students than strict criteria for which they will be graded. I understand that it’s important to be consistent, but if a student reads too much in a rubric, they may “settle” for the average requirements just to get a decent grade and not take the time to push themselves to hand in their best work. As a student, I often found (and still do find) rubrics to be confusing and daunting. Sometimes I wouldn’t even read them thoroughly because I felt like I would rather just put my best effort forward and “hope” that met the criteria. I’m assuming there are others out there like me, and I’ll keep that in mind as a teacher by not relying too heavily on rubrics. I will value the final form of assessment that the chapter discussed, student self-assessment, because it will give me an idea of what my students feel they are capable of along with how they view their own work and effort.

FIAE Chapter 5

I had never heard of the concept of tiering before reading this chapter, but it sounds very similar to scaffolding. I understand how it can be a valuable tool in the classroom because it allows students to begin with a relatively simple task and then gradually build off of that knowledge while the complexity of the task at hand increases. In theory, it makes a lot of sense. The only thing I am worried about is learning how to “tier” at a rate that is comfortable and beneficial for my students. In order to do this, not only I am going to have practice tiering like Wormeli suggests, but I’m also going to have to really get to know my students. (It seems like everything we’ve been reading about goes back to the concept of knowing your students). Once I know where their strengths are and what things they need extra help with I will be able to tier their lessons accordingly. One thing I really like about the tiering strategies that Wormeli presents is that they are easily differentiated. A few of my favorite ones were learning contracts, RAFT(S) (which reminded me a lot of GRASPS) and one-word summaries. I think that learning contracts sound excellent for differentiation because they allow students to work at their own pace and to build from the level that they are at. RAFT(S) reminded me a lot of GRASPS, except it sounds like it would take a lot of planning to create “menus.” Lastly, I think that one-word summaries are good for the English classroom because they require students to exercise their vocabulary. Again, before I could use these ideas in my classroom I would need to know my students’ strengths and weaknesses.

FIAE Chapter 6

This chapter provided a handful of straightforward and practical tips and tricks for designing test questions. While some of them seemed like common sense, many of them made me stop and think, “wow, I never thought of that before, but it makes a lot of sense.” Others alluded to things that I had experienced on tests as a student, some good and some bad. For example, I’ve always hated timed tests, and I’ve had teachers that have projected a ticking digital clock onto the screen at the front of the room during a test. This only made me anxious and made it harder for me to focus on the test. I can understand that putting a time limit on tests can sometimes be necessary and beneficial, such as when students are practicing for an AP exam. I will try not to intimidate my students with timed testing unless it is for a purpose like AP prep. Another thing that I can’t stand to see on tests as a student is questions like the first one the chapter introduces in which you are required to choose an answer that “best fits.” Unfortunately, many AP exams ask questions like this (or at least I found that the literature and language composition ones did), but it doesn’t mean that teachers should model these questions in tests that they design themselves. I certainly won’t do that in my classroom. Instead, I will do as Wormeli suggests and include a variety of different questions that are clear and straightforward. I was a little surprised by the section where he said to “include common errors as candidates for responses” (81) To me, these sound a lot like trick questions, which most students dread and deem as “unfair,” but I can understand how they provide insight as to how well as student has mastered a subject. I agree that it’s important to let students know ahead of time that there will be such questions on the test, however.